

Statement of  
R. Lee Webster Jr.  
Waynesboro, Georgia  
before the  
House Agriculture Committee  
Subcommittee on General Farm Commodities  
Hearing  
Valdosta, Georgia  
March 28, 2006

Mr. Chairman, and committee members, I would like to welcome you to Georgia and thank you for the opportunity to bring my thoughts to this hearing. My name is Lee Webster and I am a 3<sup>rd</sup> generation farmer in western Burke County, Ga. I have operated my farm continuously since 1977 growing cotton, corn, soybeans, small grains, and hay. I farm lands that were farmed by my grandfathers upon moving to Burke County and my father who retired from farming in 1998. My wife and I look forward to the future as our daughter and son are raised on our farm.

I am speaking to you today based on real life experiences gathered over some 30 years. My hope is that today's testimony will allow for future generations of Webster's and other family farmers to continue to be a part of this country's foundation and rich heritage.

I am proud to be represented by Congressman John Barrow and appreciate his interest and concerns with agriculture in the 12<sup>th</sup> District of Georgia.

As previously stated, I began farming after leaving college in 1977. As long as I can remember, I have farmed under a national farm bill. The most crucial decisions in farming result from this legislation. It is imperative that each farm bill be prepared in advance of its predecessor's ending, so that decisions can be made in an informed, timely, and effective manner. These decisions can affect the very existence of our family farms. Farmers have to meet with bankers for operating loans, equipment dealers to ensure that they will have the necessary tools to work, and Ag suppliers to meet the needs

to produce a crop. Unknowns in the farm bill make decisions of this nature a constant “best guess” rather than a knowledgeable and educated decision.

I have been fortunate to have served as the president of the Burke County Farm Bureau for the past 20 years. In this position, I have been privy to advance notice of legislation and valuable insight from farmers all over this state. I have seen the implementation of the farm programs through FSA and NRCS which stabilized agriculture and helped to promote farm conservation techniques. I have seen many farmers who would not be farming today were it not for government assistance and crop insurance. I have seen urban encroachment from metropolitan areas and the loss of agricultural land for the sake of development.

Analysis of USDA data shows that large and small farms are growing in numbers while midsize commercial farms are steadily declining. I would submit to you today that these midsize farms represent the majority of family farms. It is my firm belief that continuity of transition between farm legislation is critical to decision making among these farmers. In 2000 and 2001 leading up to implementation of the 2002 farm bill, I faced such a dilemma. At that time, I farmed some 6,000 acres of mostly cash leased land. I employed 5 full-time and 3-4 part-time workers during any crop year. I had farmed most of this land for over 20 years and through previous farm bills, had good planting history, and built good bases and good yield averages. Leading up to 2002, it was clear that our farm programs were in for radical changes. Just what these changes would be or what they might encompass was not so clear. Drought and floods which had deeply affected production during much of the 90’s clouded the picture even further. After much thought and deliberation with others, the decision was made to cut my operation back to some 1,000 acres which was mostly owned by myself and family members. This resulted in cutting labor to only 2 full-time workers and liquidation of excess equipment.

As we moved into 2002 and 2003, low farm prices and general frustration with uncertainty, prompted other family members to entertain offers and eventual sales of part

of our farm. To bring this into perspective, what I have just described is the slow but methodical breakup of my family's farm. Those 9 people who were born, lived, and worked on my farm all work in non-farm jobs, and no longer live on the farm. The excess acreage was consumed by much larger farms or developers who have subdivided the land for country estates. This scenario has played out thousands of times across this country and has effectuated the demise of our family farms.

Many people fail to see how important saving the family farm is. We currently rely on other countries to support our oil production, thus giving them a pricing monopoly on our fuel. Should our nation ever become dependant on foreign countries for food, one of the staples for our very existence, we will lose this great nation. The family farm ensures America's security.

As time has proven, the 2002 farm bill has turned out to be one of the greatest pieces of farm legislation. It has created some of the greatest stability while offering the greatest amount of flexibility in plantings ever offered to agriculture. At last accounting, it has come in some \$11 billion under budget. To my recollection this is unprecedented among any other farm bill. This is not to say that the money was over-budgeted, but is evidence that intelligent, forward thinking people have not only created something that works, but works very well. It is no secret that farming operations face considerable variables to success; weather, commodity pricing, input costs, and labor issues. One of our local farmers last year had budgeted \$1.65 per gallon for fuel which seemed more than adequate for early 2005. Actual costs were \$2.10 per gallon. Fixed costs are unfortunately non-negotiable and are impossible to absorb with profit margins running so closely. This man is no longer farming.

The family farm not only benefits from a healthy farm bill, but relies on it to exist. The current DoHa trade negotiations seek to level trade within a world market. Our commodity exports to other countries are not equal to our imports. To finalize a farm bill prior to completion of the DoHa negotiations would only place our farmers at an extreme disadvantage by making any new strategies for farm legislation obsolete. We cannot

afford to do this. Our current farm bill needs to be extended until these negotiations are complete, then we will have the knowledge and information to make educated decisions to keep the family farm in business.

Another benefit of the 2002 farm bill is the way it addresses rural development. I have been privileged to serve on the Burke County Planning Commission since its inception in 1995 and serve as its Chairman since 1997. Many of the problems with growing pains which we face by being located adjacent to a major metropolitan area are evident in Burke County. This bill lends assistance and gives much needed direction in areas faced by rural counties across this nation.

Finally, I would like to note that any change made to the farm bill should include some mechanism to assist farmers with dramatic, unforeseen input costs (i.e. fuel, fertilizer, etc.) which seem to be spiraling out of control. Farming is capital intensive, and abrupt changes cannot be absorbed in short periods of time.

Again, thank you for this opportunity to give my thoughts on the new farm legislation.